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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the impact of parents with different language backgrounds on the language acquisition and language competency of their children in the mother tongue, Chinese, and a second language, English, in Singapore. Parents were surveyed on language usage and language materials provided to their children. Exams on vocabulary, listening comprehension, story comprehension, translation, and verbal fluency were given to students in both English and Chinese in a preschool and a primary school that taught both languages. The findings showed that the respondent parents and students from both schools were at ease using the language in which they were most competent, and most parents in both schools purchased learning and reading materials in both English and Chinese. The language of the extra reading and learning materials bought or borrowed had hardly any impact on the scores of language tests. Only the language of the books read aloud to the children made a difference. As expected, children read to in Chinese scored better on the Chinese vocabulary and fluency tests; the converse was true for those read to in English. Results suggest that the extent of exposure to a language makes a difference to a child's competency in the language. (AP)

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THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN ENHANCING BILINGUAL LEARNING IN PRE-SCHOOLS

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In 1966, bilingualism, ie. English and the mother tongue (Malay, Tamil and Chinese), was made compulsory. This was implemented with two political objectives in mind. The English component is seen as a means to foster interethnic interaction and a Singapore identity. Moreover, English was needed as a language for international Communication, Science and Technology and was providing access to modernization and progress. On the other hand, the intention of the mother tongues was seen as serving to maintain cultural roots and to provide cultural ballast.

The 1990 Census of Population showed that there is an encouraging increase in the number of people using the official languages that is, English, Mandarin, Malay and Tamil, as their language of daily communication at home and at work. However, not many students are really effectively bilingual (Goh Report, 1979) and have problems trying to cope with two languages.

The bilingual policy in Singapore is taken seriously by the authorities and many schemes were launched at the primary and pre-school levels to enhance bilingual learning in the young children. Schools are given the flexibility to decide on the ratio of English and Mother Tongue lessons in the curriculum. To emphasize the importance of bilingual mastery, students who aspire for tertiary education need to score a credit in English and passes in the Mother Tongue and Mathematics in order to gain a place in the pre-university classes.

As pre-school and primary pupils spend a great deal of their working hours at home, parents play a vital role in enhancing bilingual learning in pre-schoolers.

Many studies have been carried out on the acqusition of a second language by young children (Gardner and Lambert, 1959, 1972; Gardner and Smythe, 1975; Gardner, 1981) within the family context. The Gardner-Lambert studies indicate that prejudiced attitude towards the other ethnic linguistic group - quite independent of language learning abilities or verbal intelligence - can upset and disturb the motivation needed to learn the other's language, just as open, inquisitive, and friendly attitudes can enhance and enliven the language learning process. It was also observed that parental attitudes positive or negative, are picked up by children so that pupils bring a family complex of attitudes to the language class with them. Gardner and Smythe (1975) have found that persistence in language study and eagerness to interact in language class also hinge on the attitudes and motivation pupils bring to school (Gardner, 1981). Parents' suspicions and prejudices about out-groups, or about own group can determine the academic route their children will follow and also the language identity their children will develop (Frasure Smith, Lambert & Taylor, 1975). Hence it can be seen that parental preferences, attitudes and prejudice towards languages would shape their children's language acquisition and

achievement. Their attitude could be further reflected in their conscious effort to foster bilingualism in the home, eg. cooperation between the parents to provide vocabulary for new experience for the children by communicating with each parent in a different language. Other aids which parents can utilize to develop their children's bilingualism are books, cassettes and records, radio and television, games, outing, shopping, playgroups and visits to linguistic homelands (Saunders, 1983).

Singapore parents are well aware of the economic and academic advantages of being effectively bilingual. Hence most of them would made the effort to help their children acquire bilingual competency. The aim of this study is to find out how parents with different language background help their children acquire competency in both English and Chinese.

METHODOLOGY

This study took place in two schools with contrasting emphasis in their bilingual curricula. School X is a SAP (Special Assistance Plan) primary school which teaches both English and Chinese as First Language. The ratio of lessons taught in English and Chinese was 4:6 at the pre-school level. School Y provided the Alternative Programme with stronger emphasis on English. The ratio of English to Chinese lesson was 7:3 (Table 1) (Note: pre-primary classes were discontinued after one year). The age of participating subjects was between 5+ and 6+. Fifty-three and fifty-one subjects from School X and School Y respectively participated in the study.

For this study, only the Chinese and English languages were examined because the SAP Schools only offered English and Chinese at the pre-school level.

Subjects were assessed on a battery of tests on Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, Story Comprehension, Translation and Verbal Fluency in both English and Chinese. Parents of participating subjects were requested to fill in a questionnaire on their usage of languages and their provision of learning materials at home for their child.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

One would assume that parents would want to send their children to a school to master a language which parents are not very fluent or competent in. This assumption does not hold true for parents in this study. Parents from the SAP School (X) used

Chinese most frequently with their children (Respondent Parent (RP). 52.63% and Other Parent (OP): 56.60%). Similarly parents from School Y spoke with their children most frequently in English (RP: 62.75%; OP: 70.59%). As expected, the respondent parents from both schools were most at ease using the language they were competent in, Chinese for School X and English for School Y (Table 2).

However, it is worthwhile to note that more parents from School X spoke English with their children (37.74%, 37.74%) then parents from School Y speaking Chinese with their children (35.29%, 23.53%). It is heartening to note that 20% of our children from both schools communicated with their peers in both English and Chinese (X:22.64%, Y:25.49%). While the usage of English and Chinese was quite balanced in School X (Eng: 35.85%, Chin 37.74%), subjects form School Y were predominantly English speaking (Eng: 47.06%, Chin: 23.53%). This seems to follow a pattern set by their parents.

From Table 3, it can be noted that parents from School X preferred to buy reading and educational materials while parents from School Y preferred to borrow books for their children. While 24.53% of parents from School X did not purchase any learning materials for their children, 31.37% of parents from School Y were in the same category. A higher percentage (41.51%) of X parents than Y parents (227.45%) did not borrow reading materials for their children. Most parents in both schools purchased learning and reading materials in both English and Chinese (X: 68%, Y:53%).

Over 35% of parents read to their children in both languages. While a balance of reading in either language (Eng: 24.53%, Chin: 20.75%) was detected in School X, reading to children was done predominantly in English for School Y parents (49.02%). Almost all children received help in their school work from their parents. Only 9.43% of children in School X and 3.92% of children in School Y did not receive any help. Parents seemed to focus on helping their children in their English and Chinese reading, alphabets and writing in both languages (our 40% for both Schools).

The language used most frequently by parents with pre-schoolers and the language used by pre schoolers with their peers made a difference in their scores on Vocabulary, Listening Comprehension, Story Comprehension, Translation and Verbal Fluency (Table 4). Pre-schoolers whose parents conversed with them in English scored significantly higher marks in the English tests than those whose language of communication with parents was Chinese or Dialects. The reverse scenario was seen for the Chinese tests. Pre-schoolers scored significantly better in the Chinese tests when Chinese was used frequently as a medium of communication. However, it was also noticeable that using the

Chinese language as the medium of communication did not have as strong an impact on the tests as the English language, except Verbal Fluency.

The language of extra reading and learning materials bought or borrowed had hardly any impact on the scores of language tests. Only the language of the books read to the children made a difference, and only in Vocabulary and Verbal Fluency ($P \leq .0003$). As expected, children read to in Chinese scored better in their Chinese Vocabulary and Verbal Fluency test. The converse was true for those read to in English.

CONCLUSION

The results of the study have some important implications for parents as well as for teachers. The extent of exposure to a language makes a difference to a child's competency in the language. The language of learning and reading materials bought or borrowed has little impact unless an effort is made by the parents to use them with the child such as reading the books to the him. It is also interesting to note that more children seemed to be using both languages to communicate than their parents.

However, it is perplexing to find parents who are strong in English sending their children to a predominantly English speaking school. Moreover, the parents were also more monolingual in their preference for language usage. Would their attitudes effect their children interest in the learning of Chinese? It is rather worrying in view of research findings which point out the strong influence parental attitudes have on their children's motivation in learning a subject. It is not enough to provide bilingual learning materials at home without parental interest shown in bilingualism. What about the teachers? Would the presence of bilingual teachers be more inspiring to the pupils than having monolingual teachers?

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TABLE 1: COMPARISON OF TWO BILINGUAL PROGRAMMES IN TWO PRE-SCHOOLS

	Special Assistance Plan (*SCHOOL X*)	Alternative Programme (*SCHOOL Y*)
% of Teaching Time in	(N = 53)	(N = 51)
English	40 %	70 %
Chinese	60 %	30 %

TABLE 2: LANGUAGE USAGE

		SCHOOL X					SCHOOL Y				
		ENG	CHIN	DIA	E & C	E/C/D	ENG	CHIN	DIA	E & C	E/C/ D
1	Language used most frequently by respondent parent	24 (45.25 %)	28 (52.83%)	1 (1.89%)	-	-	37 (72.55%)	14 (27.45%)	0 0	-	-
2	Language used most frequently by respondent with child	20 (37.74%)	30 (56.60%)	3 (5.66%)	-	-	32 (62.75%)	18 (35.29%)	1 (1.96%)	-	-
3	Language used most frequently by other parent with child	20 (37.74%)	30 (56.60%)	3 (5.66%)	-	-	36 (70.59%)	12 (23.53%)	3 (5.88%)	-	-
4	Language(s) used by child with other children	19 (35.85%)	20 (37.74%)	1 (1.89%)	12 (22.64%)	1 (1.89%)	24 (47.06%)	12 (23.53%)	0 0	13 (25.49%)	2 (3.92%)

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TABLE 3: LANGUAGE OF EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS PROVIDED BY PARENTS

	Materials	School											
1	Books Bought		Not At All	Alph/ Numbers	English Story	Eng & Chin Writting/Eng Story	Eng Story/ Alph/Numners	Eng & Chin Story	Eng & Chin Writing & Story	Alph/Chin & Eng Story	Eng & Chin Writting	All	
		X	13 (24.53%)	3 (5.60%)	4 (7.55%)	5 (9.43%)	0 (0 %)	5 (9.47%)	6 (11.32%)	3 (5.66%)	2 (3.77%)	12 (22.64%)	
		Y	16 (31.37%)	0	8 (15.69%)	2 (3.92%)	3 (5.89%)	5 (9.80%)	3 (5.89%)	4 (7.84%)	1 (1.96%)	9 (17.65%)	
2	Books borrowed		Not at all	Chin Story	Eng Story	Eng & Chin Story	Eng Story/ Alph/Numbers						
		X	22 (41.51%)	4 (7.55%)	4 (7.55%)	19 (35.85%)	0 (0%)						
		Y	14 (27.45%)	0 (0%)	16 (31.37%)	18 (35.29%)	1 (1.95%)						
3	Language of books read to children		Not at all	Eng	Chin	Eng & Chin							
		X	8 (15.0%)	13 (24.53%)	11 (20.75%)	21 (39.962%)							
		Y	3 (5.88%)	25 (49.02%)	5 (9.80%)	18 (35.29%)							
4	Helping children with lessons		Not al all	Chin Writting /Alph	Chin & Eng Writing	Eng Reading	Eng Reading / Chin Writing	Eng & Chin Reading	Chin/ Eng Reading & Writing	Eng/ Chin Reading & Writing/Alph	Eng Reading & Writing & Songs	All except Chin Songs	All
		X	5 (9.43%)	3 (5.66%)	2 (3.77%)	1 (1.89%)	0 (0%)	6 (11.32%)	9 (16.98%)	3 (5.66%)	0 (0%)	2 (3.77%)	7 (13.21%)
		Y	2 (3.92%)	1 (1.96%)	1 (1.96%)	2 (3.92%)	2 (3.92%)	2 (3.92%)	6 (11.76%)	6 (11.76%)	5 (9.80%)	3 (5.89%)	6 (11.76%)

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TABLE 4: F-RATIOS OF LANGUAGE SCORES ACCORDING TO LANGUAGE USAGE

			Vocabulary	Listening Comprehension	Story Comprehension	Translation	Verbal Fluency
1	Respondent parent language usage	English	339.77 (4*)	4.93 (2*)	9.57 (3*)	2.89	32.46 (4*)
		Chinese		3.07 (*)	1.46	5.72 (2*)	11.89 (4*)
2	Language used most Frequently with child	English	453.12 (4*)	3.27 (*)	10.66 (4*)	4.99 (2*)	27.97 (4*)
		Chinese		3.86 (*)	7.6 (2*)	3.46 (*)	14.24 (4*)
3	Language used most frequently by other parent with children	English	571.64 (4*)	1.24	10.10 (4*)	4.26 (*)	29.33 (4*)
		Chinese		3.39 (*)	4.83 (2*)	9.18 (2*)	8.94 (3*)
3	Language used by child with peers	English	380.65 (4*)	4.12 (2*)	15.57 (4*)	1.60	25.93 (4*)
		Chinese		1.49	2.4 (*)	7.19(4*)	1.99

4* ≤ .0001
3* ≤ .001
2* ≤ .01
* ≤ .05